Critically evaluate the terms of the Treaty of Versailles

The Great War finally ended when Germany was forced to surrender and sign an armistice due to exhaustion of resources and internal political problems. The Allies were bolstered by American support, but Germany had no such backing and was compelled to agree to whatever terms the Allies imposed upon her, or else face the threat of renewed war. The Germans were completely and utterly defeated. In face of the decline of four major empires (The Russian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Hapsburg Empire and the German Empire), the Allies were faced with the task of resolving the ever-complex political turmoil of Europe. They decided to hold a Peace Conference involving thirty-two nations (but notably *not* the neutral and defeated powers) which would represent the world, but this open-mindedness quickly collapsed and gave way to the Big Three—the leaders of France, Great Britain and the USA—all of whom had different plans in mind for Europe and the world to come. What emerged from the Peace Conference was the Treaty of Versailles; a non-negotiated, dictated peace imposed on Germany, characterized by a harshness that would humiliate Germany to such an extent as to fuel a Second World War.

The Treaty of Versailles was originally to be based on Woodrow Wilson’s idealistic Fourteen Points and had two major objectives that were to be kept in mind. The first objective was to build up the principle of self-determination by creating new nation states from the ruins of the collapsed empires. The Treaty was supposed to ensure that these new states would be well-formed and secure. The second objective, though mainly the product of the French Prime Minister Clemenceau’s desire for revenge and national security, was to cripple Germany to such an extent that she would never be able to re-form her military powers and start another invasion again. The major points of the Treaty, thus, was the War-Guilt Clause, in which Germany was forced to take the brunt of the blame for the war, the de-militarization of Germany, the territorial mandates and the very heavy war reparations that Germany was to pay. The product of these terms was a slightly muddled Treaty that was called a “tainted document” by many and a “diktat” by the Germans, because although the Fourteen Points were entirely idealistic, the Treaty did not exactly adhere to all its principles and the Germans felt that the principles had been circumvented where they did not favor the Allies.

Six main faults:

1. Defeated powers were absent from negotiations. The Germans were forced to sign the treaty at gunpoint. The peace was thus imposed upon Germany.
   1. The German army was to be limited to 100, 000 men. A small navy was allowed, but there were to be no submarines and no air force.
   2. Rhineland occupied
   3. The Saar coal mines given to France, administered by the League of Nations for fifteen years.
2. Self-determination did not apply to Germany. The Germans who lived in the Polish corridor were sacrificed to Poland’s economic need for a route to the Baltic, the Germans of the Sudetenland were included in Czechoslovakia for geographical and defense reasons, Austria, a German state, was not allowed to unite with Germany because the combination would be too powerful.
   1. The union of Austria-Hungary was forbidden.
   2. Northern Schleswig was given to Denmark and some small districts to Belgium
   3. Poland was recreated with a corridor to the Baltic containing the German port of Danzig which was to be a free city under the auspices of the League of Nations
3. Imposition of reparations. The sum decided was well beyond Germany’s capacity to pay. Not only did reparations create economic difficulties in the countries that received Germany’s payments, but they also prolonged the bitterness of the war.
   1. Germany was found guilty of starting the war, and therefore was to pay reparations as compensation for damage caused by the fighting. 6.6 billion pounds to be paid in installments
4. The settlement created a power vacuum in Europe. Germany was greatly weakened politically and economically, but still possessed considerable potential strength. Instead of having the large Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires on her eastern frontier, however, she was now bordered by small, weak and new states. IN addition Russia and the USA had withdrawn from full participation in European affairs. Only a greatly weakened France, with the half-hearted support of Britain, was left to balance Germany’s potential strength.
5. Settlement did not pay enough attention to economic needs. Economic units like Upper Silesia were divided, while more countries and longer frontiers were created, which meant that tariffs, which increased prices and generally hindered the movement of trade, were more numerous.
6. The settlement created many national minorities within states. The population of Europe was so mixed that it was impossible to draw up tidy national frontiers with each country containing the people of one race only. Countries gave promises to respect the rights of minorities but often relations were bitter.
   1. All German colonies became mandated territories under the league of nations